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Mark Twain

A THOUSAND people have wondered what the especial charm of Mark Twain's writings is. It is that he was different from any other writer that ever lived. His marvelous sense of humor followed him to every place and shone out in print in a light never dreamed of before. We will try to make this clear by a simple incident. An earthquake is generally held to be a serious affair, and the more men see of them and their effects the more serious they seem. Well, about 10 a. m. one Sunday morning in the 60's, a severe shock was felt in San Francisco and vicinity. At that time Clemens was in that city, and he wrote "a description" of the quake to the Virginia Enterprise. From an imperfect memory, we copy a few sentences, as follows:

"All at once the old world seemed to be seized with cramps. The plums in California are just getting ripe; you may remember what half-ripe plums did to you when as a boy you used to steal them. Men, for the moment, lost their wits, apparently. Indeed there was only one man in San Francisco who showed any presence of mind, and he was a preacher over in Oakland. He did just what I would have done had I been given a chance. He went down out of his pulpit and embraced a woman. The papers say she was his wife and maybe she was, but if she was it was a pity. It would have shown so much more presence of mind to have embraced some other gentleman's wife.

"A young man came down from the fifth story of a house on Stockton street. He had on no clothing except a knit undershirt, which came about as near concealing his person, as does the tin-foil a champagne bottle.

"Men yelled at him, small boys shouted to him, while women besought him to take their sunbonnets, their parasols, their aprons, their hoop skirts—anything, to cover himself up and not stand there distracting people's attention from the earthquake.

"The young man gazed all around, then gazed down at himself, and then he went upstairs. I am told he went up lively.

"Pete Hopkins—he weighed 400 pounds—was shaken off Telegraph hill onto a three story house. The papers, always misrepresenting things, ascribed the destruction of the house to the earthquake."

In that strain he wandered on through a column and a half of those long, wide columns which the Enterprise was published in. He did it, too, while the thousands around him were still shuddering from the memory of the quake and fearing a repetition of it.

When W. H. Shaw (Josh Billings) passed through here on his way to California—where he died a few days later—he said that coming through New York he went to Clemens' hotel and was told that he was over in Jersey, had gone over to lecture and would be back that night late. Then Shaw asked for the key to Mark's room. He was well known so the key was given him. Mark came in about 2 a. m. Turning up the gas he went to the bed in which was Shaw and looking at him said: "Hello, Josh." Shaw returned the "hello" and then asked where Mark had been. "Been over in Jersey lecturing," was the response. "Had a good time?" asked Shaw. "Had a h—l of a time," said Mark, and then explained: "Before the lecture a young man came to me, led me to the curtain, through a hole in the curtain, showed me an old decrepit gray-haired man in one of the orchestra chairs, and said in a sorrowful tone, "Mr. Clemens, that is my father; he has had a settled melancholy for years, and if you can say anything to arouse him, it will be an immense comfort and satisfaction to our whole family." I said "All right." The curtain went up; in a little while I fired a joke at the old cuss. It did not phase him; after a while I shot another at him, didn't phase him; then I gathered myself up and fired my old shore-shaker at him, which generally catches 'em, but he just stared blankly at me. Concluding that something was due the audience, that I could not devote the whole evening to one man, I went on and finished my lecture. Then the young man came again and asked innocently, but earnestly, if I had succeeded in arousing his father. I told him no, that he sat there as though he did not hear a word." "I suspect that must be true," said the young reprobate. "He has been deaf as a post for twenty years." And I had no weapons with me.

Cork, Ireland, is a literary center, having among its people some of the finest scholars and writers in the United Kingdom. Mark Twain went there to lecture. The announcement of his coming was hailed with delight, but the people there are Irish and like to do a little joking on their own account sometimes, so they quietly agreed among themselves that they would make no sign, no matter what Twain might say. The evening arrived, a packed and splendidly dressed audience greeted him with prolonged applause as he arose to speak. But then came a hush. Never before was an audience so silent. Mark shot a joke at them, but there was no response. A little later he tried another joke, no response. The silence was like that darkness in Egypt, told about in Genesis. It was so dense that it could be felt. Twain began to suspect something. In due time he reached his favorite joke and in his best form shot it at the silent statues before him. Then he stopped, ran his fingers through his long hair and finally with his drawl, and in a conversational tone said: "I trust I may be pardoned, if I remark that when I address an educated and enlightened audience and reach the point I just passed, they laugh."

That was too much for his hearers. Shouts shook the hall and flowers fell in broadsides around him. It was some minutes before he could proceed.

He took the manuscript of "Innocents Abroad" to a stately New York publisher, and laying the manuscript and his card on the publisher's desk, said: "I should like to get that manuscript stuck into antimony." The publisher glanced at the manuscript and the card, and looking up, said: "Who are your references, Mr. Clemens?" "Haven't any in the world," said Mark. "The only two men I could apply to are Joe Goodman and Jerry Driscoll, and they wouldn't count, because they'd lie for me just as I'd lie for them."

Could some one have kept near Clemens in his lifetime and taken down half the quaint things he said, he would have something that would make a book vastly funnier than anything Mark ever wrote, for his fund of humor was inexhaustible, while the language that flowed spontaneously from his lips was a gold mine set to words.

In other times and under happier auspices, Clemens might have made a name in other fields than literature. But he was born and reared in Missouri, and in 1860-1 he held the same political sentiments that the great majority of Missourians did in those days. He always clung to them. When he went to live in the east, the strange thing is that he settled in Connecticut. The secret, we presume, was that he found a different race of men and women from what he expected—a race he had never dreamed of before.

He never gave any expression of his political views until Mr. Cleveland was elected President. Needless to say they were in entire accord. Had he gone South instead of East, he might easily have become a politician; but such a change would have been a loss to him—for a defeat or two would have utterly discouraged him. It would have been an irreparable loss to the reading world now and in the future five thousand years.

In his watches through the long nights in the pilot house of a Mississippi steamer, in the darkness around him and the heavy wash of the great river against his craft, and only a few stars above, something of the solemnity settled upon him; in the wild frontier life of the west, where extravagances of words and acts are sometimes applauded, all his former rural restraint vanished; when in the east the refined nature of the brilliant woman who became his wife cast its spell upon him, his education was completed and he was ready to call out all that was best and noblest in his heart and brain. How splendidly he acquitted himself, the world is now ready to gratefully acknowledge.

How the old days come back and with them the memories of those days when Nevada was first being redeemed from the wilderness. As we read that "Mark Twain" is dead, a long procession seems to form and march before us.

Daggett, "De Quille," Goodman, Putnam, McCarty, Gillis, Rhodes, Baldwin and a hundred more that came long before the electric light and drove away the darkness. They set in motion a new literature; they made men forget hardships and laugh misfortunes to scorn; if they had troubles of their own they made fun of them; they were main factors in smoothing the trails so that civilization might, on unsoiled sandals, come and make a home in the desert. They wore out the best of their lives there and if they were not fully appreciated they did not grieve, but rather were sorry that the great public could not see that angels were walking among them.

There was never such another place as was Virginia City then, and the men were created to fill the place. The quaintest genius of all was he who died on Thursday week. His wit, his humor and clear sense shone out every day on the Enterprise; a ripple of laughter followed him until at last the world caught the infection. Since then he has been famous. The change from his rollicking life on the Comstock to his dignified and delightful home in New England was very great, but he fitted both places alike. For forty years his life went from one triumph to another, and was a most enviable one. Despite his exquisite sense of humor, he was given two days of depression, and when a petted child was taken from him, then his superb wife, then when financial losses came to him and finally when his youngest child died, his heart was no longer strong enough to bear the repeated shocks and for a half year